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Personal Safety for Children

By Katie Evans Reineck, M.S.W., Ph.D.



Ask any child what the most important safety rule is and the majority will say, "Don't talk to strangers." Clearly, stranger danger is important to discuss, but do not stop there. Unfortunately, over 90% of sexual assault victims know their offender. Most often, the person that abuses them is a family member, friend, or acquaintance. Sadly, many offenders are juveniles themselves.

What can you do to reduce the likelihood that your child is a sexual abuse victim? First, be an approachable parent. Second, communicate that you are open by beginning to talk to children about their bodies when they

are toddlers. Begin educating your child about his/her body early. When children start naming their ears, eyes, arms and legs, help them learn the proper names for their private parts as well.

Depending on your child's developmental level, you can begin to educate them about different kinds of touch when they are three or four years old. Explain the difference between good, bad, and secret touching. Teach children that their bodies belong to them and that they have the right to say "no" to touches they do not like. (This includes giving children the right to decide whom they want to give and receive hugs and kisses.) Most importantly, impress on children the importance of reporting touch that makes them feel uncomfortable or confused. Children (and even adults) cannot always stop abuse, but they can report it.

An excellent book about different kinds of touch and good boundaries is *A Very Touching Book* by Jan Hindman. This book (appropriate for all ages) talks about three different kinds of touch: good touch, bad touch, and secret touch. It helps children understand that good touch makes us feel good, bad touch hurts, and secret touch is about a grown-up touching the "special parts" of a child's body and making it a secret. Hindman defines "special parts" by giving the proper names for privates and encouraging children and parents to think of other "silly" names they have heard for these parts as well. The distinction is made between a grown-up touching a child's "special parts" when they need help (e.g. bathing, seeing the doctor, etc.) and touching these parts and trying to get the child to feel like he/she needs to keep it a secret. Children enjoy this book for its creative cartoon-like illustrations.

Third, help children feel good about their bodies and themselves. For instance, young children love to do life-sized body drawings. This is an excellent opportunity to praise a child and encourage the child to think about the special things his/her body can do. Appropriate compliments and encouragement are important at all ages. Listen to your

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Journaling for Change

Do you have specific goals that you would like to achieve? Fitness? Health? Career? Are you feeling frustrated with certain relationships? Or, are you feeling stressed or unhappy? Whether it is achieving a specific goal or managing negative situations and feelings, journaling can be a valuable tool. In fact, studies show that writing about painful feelings and events may help you feel better.

While many books have been written that describe numerous journaling methods, it is important to develop a process that will be useful to you. Three specific methods will be outlined here: the log journal, the chronological or memory journal, and the expressive/creative journal.

The Log Journal

Uses: Achieving goals (e.g. fitness, financial, career, weight loss, career change or advancement)

How To: This is the easiest method for most people, especially for those that do not have the time to write. You can use a small notebook or a calendar to record details of your progress. (For instance, runners log books or journals have been developed just for this purpose.) Begin by listing your goals and the actions that will be helpful in reaching them. Perhaps your goal is fitness and weight loss. The more specific you are in defining your goals, the more success you will have in achieving them. Suppose that you have decided to work out six hours per week and lose 30 lbs. In your log journal you could record the amount of time you are exercising each day, type of activity you are doing, and list what foods you are eating.

Advantages: Reviewing your entries can assist you in identifying patterns. You may find that some actions are more helpful than others in reaching your goal. Seeing your record of effort and success will also increase your motivation to change.

The Chronological or Memory Journal

Uses: Recording events or memories over time (e.g., managing the pain of a traumatic event, healing the pain of grief and loss, recording a family history)

How To: This type of journal is a narrative of a specific event or a series of events. For instance, if a loved one has died, the feelings of loss are initially overwhelming. Taking time to make an entry each day can give you an outlet for these feelings. You may find it helpful to write what you are thinking and feeling each day. Include stories of your times together or simply keep lists of things you need to do each day if daily functioning is a challenge. Alternatively, use this type of journal to describe family history or record the developmental milestones of your child. Include family photos along with the narrative. Have your child draw pictures or include his/her stories. Children enjoy hearing family stories, especially when they have helped to create them or when they are playing a leading role.

Advantages: A journal provides a safe outlet for intense feelings. Re-telling the story of a painful event helps you integrate the experience. Re-reading entries several months later or a year later assists in providing perspective on situations. A family history journal provides perspective on issues as well. In addition, there are several other benefits of a family journal: you have created a personalized storybook for your kids to enjoy and they may be motivated to create their own journals. (My daughter started a journal on her first day of kindergarten. She completed ten pages of drawings and her book included

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Bipolar Disorder:

How Can the Family Help?

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maps of every center in the classroom, the playground, and even the girls' bathroom. She had me label everything and write brief descriptions of the events of the day.)

The Expressive/Creative Journal

Uses: Dealing with daily challenges, improving relationships, managing overwhelming feelings, coping with depression and anxiety.

How To: The format for this journal is variable. Other than recording a date for each entry, let your mood and feelings guide the process. You may choose to write letters, draw, paint, collage, etc. For instance, if you are angry with a family member, write them a letter that you will not send. (You may wish to send something later, but that is not the purpose during a journaling exercise). The purpose in a journal entry is to express all of your feelings, the rational and the irrational. Having expressed all the feelings in a safe place, you may now approach the situation in a calm and clear manner. Some feelings are so intense that it is difficult to put them into words. Draw these feelings and use different colors to describe them.

Advantages: This format is very flexible and spontaneous. It provides an outlet for feelings beyond words. Again, a journal is a safe place to explore your experience. It is available at all hours, day or night.

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Bipolar disorder can be an extremely complex and confusing illness characterized by swings in mood from euphoric highs to severe and debilitating depression. Living with someone with this condition, you can clearly observe the changes in moods and behavior as the person cycles from high to low. During the manic phase, a person with bipolar disorder may typically be agitated and irritable, exhibit more energy than usual, sleep very little, may go on spending sprees, or have an insatiable sexual desire. While depressed he/she may withdraw, have difficulty getting out of bed, or feel hopeless and suicidal.

The first step in assisting someone with bipolar disorder is to encourage them to get treatment. Studies show that medication combined with counseling is more effective for bipolar disorder than many other psychiatric problems according to the March 2004 Harvard Mental Health Letter.

Learn as much as you can about bipolar disorder. You can do this by listening to your loved one describe his/her experience. Read *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Jamison. Dr. Jamison has a Ph.D. in psychology and has bipolar disorder as well. She provides an outstanding description of the patient's experience of the illness.

Be a part of your loved one's support system. Family members are usually the first ones to be aware of changes in mood. Dr. Julia Mayo, SL Vincent's Hospital, NYC (www.bipolarworld.net) suggests family members obtain an oral contract with the patient to intervene by doing the following: provide feedback on moods and behaviors, call the patient's doctor (and/or mental health therapist), modify the living situation to reduce stimulation or schedule demands, remain calm and positive, and encourage the patient to make positive choices, to include taking medication.

child. Validate his/her feelings about situations before rushing in with solutions to problems.

Fourth, realize that educating your child about his/her body and personal safety is an ongoing process. With each new developmental stage, your child's understanding increases and the challenges change. Here are a few suggestions:

For ages 6 to 10: *Where Did I Come From?*, by Peter Mayle

For ages 9 to 12: *What's Happening to Me?*, by Peter Mayle

My Body, My Self for Boys and *My Body, My Self for Girls*, both by Lynda Madaras

For teens: *It's a Girl Thing*, by Mavis Jukes

The Teenage Guy's Survival Guide,
by Jeremy Daldry

For adults: *How to Talk to Your Child about Sex: It's Best to Start Early, But it's Never too Late*,
by Linda Eyre and Richard M. Eyre

Finally, keep the lines of communication open. Children will talk to you about their concerns when they feel emotionally safe in their relationship with you. To provide an emotionally safe relationship, listen. Look for opportunities to provide affirmation and support. Be careful how you express disagreement, criticism, and concern.

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